

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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## POPULATION DECLINE WAS BASIS FOR CLOSURE OF CANVASBACK HUNTING SEASON

The Fish and Wildlife Service's recent closure of the canvasback duck hunting season across the Nation was based on evidence that fall flights of this popular game bird had dropped significantly in recent years--from a range of 1-1/2 to 2 million in the late 1950's to fewer than 1 million canvasbacks now.

The Service has launched an expanded research program on canvasbacks and has allotted \$200,000 for this purpose. The possibility will be explored that declining habitat quality in certain key areas may be affecting the status of this important species. The possible effects of disease, pesticides, and other pollutants also will be studied. Concern has been expressed that Hurricane Agnes may have affected food supplies for waterfowl wintering in the Chesapeake Bay area, the most important wintering area for canvasbacks on the Atlantic Coast.

The downward trend has occurred despite improved habitat conditions in the prairie pothole region of Canada, where the majority of canvasbacks breed. The area was plagued by drought in the late 1950's and early 1960's, but since that time the number of potholes has about doubled.

Canvasbacks have a high annual mortality rate (about 75 percent for immatures and 35-50 percent for adults), approximately half of which is due to hunting. The bird also has been plagued by decreased nesting success, particularly in the eastern part of the breeding range. Nest predation by raccoons, which have invaded the prairies in large numbers in recent years, may be partly responsible.

Some of the same difficulties are believed to be affecting redhead ducks, and the season has been closed on this species in the Atlantic, Mississippi and Central flyways. Redhead populations, although larger than canvasbacks, are at their low point in history following a precipitous three-year decline. In addition, redheads closely resemble canvasbacks, making it difficult for hunters to distinguish between the two species. Redheads may be hunted in the Pacific flyway, however, where they are sufficiently segregated from canvasbacks and where many birds are produced from local breeding stocks.

Waterfowl population estimates are derived primarily from aerial surveys of ducks and habitat conditions conducted each spring and summer by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service. The regulation frameworks themselves are established by the Fish and Wildlife Service after consultation with State fish and game agencies, flyway councils, and major private conservation organizations.

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